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ABSTRACT

The second language learner cannot be expected to have as strong a drive to refine his language as the first language learner. In first language acquisition, cognitive development and language development occur together, which induces meaningful generalizations. In second language learning, meaning and form are separate, particularly in the expression of modality. Second language learners only revive their operational competence with pedagogical support in the form of effective feedback. Corrective feedback can generate or aggravate discrepancies between form and meaning, but operational feedback that encourages learner adjustment of previous input induces active learner participation and will therefore be more effective. (MSE)

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Corrective or operational feedback
to beginners' productions

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Abstract

This article concerns feedback to EFL beginners who
make their first attempts at non-imitative production.
A treatment of feedback that induces adjustment of
previous input by the learner (operational feedback)
is compared with feedback that provides correction
(corrective feedback) but generates or aggravates
discrepancies between form and intended meaning.

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Introduction

Feedback works both ways: it can be generated by the learner's reaction to incomprehensible input or by the teacher's reaction to the student's defective output. Feedback as directed to the teacher by the student has become a parameter in recent studies. The ensuing "interactional modification" of the input by the teacher has even been regarded as the major key to language acquisition. As a consequence, low-intermediate students, who have at least acquired enough familiarity with the new language to capture the modification better than the original, have overshadowed absolute beginners, who do not even have that capacity. The tendency has also prevailed, in attempts at optimizing learning conditions, to take it for granted that comprehension automatically results in production:

"As a result of such negotiation [as generated by interactional modification], learners come to comprehend L2 words and grammatical structures beyond their current level of linguistic competence, and, *ultimately, incorporate these items into their own spontaneous productions*" (my italics) (Pica et al 1968 8)

This may be the way languages are learned in the so-called natural environment, where constant exposure develops familiarity whatever guiding procedures are used. Not so in schools, where exposure is necessarily reduced and where it does not follow that learners are able to produce items once they have demonstrated their capacity to identify them in tests of listening comprehension. The old conception of feedback as generated by the teacher's reaction to students' misproductions has not lost all validity: the student whose tentative output attests that his grasp of a given input was unsatisfactory needs feedback from the teacher on how to reconsider this input together with his output and achieve more accurate self-expression. The reason that teacher-generated forms of feedback have often been deemed ineffective is possibly that they used

to ignore ⁽¹⁾ the embryonic meaning or form in the learner's tentative output: they simply provided a "correction" ⁽²⁾ that conformed to language constraints but carried little or no reverberation of the student's original endeavour. I will give some examples of such ill-adapted feedback, all based on some (re)formulation that provides new input which the student is bound to perceive as unrelated to the input he received before. The teacher who uses this corrective mode of feedback seems to believe that hearing the correct form or comment will eradicate all future misproductions.

The present paper attempts to rehabilitate feedback as directed to the student by the teacher. Reformulation can be replaced by a strategy that manages to revive old input. The student receives hints rather than provision until he adjusts his present intent to a form he has known for some time but has not quite made his own yet. Feedback then becomes operational rather than corrective and generates a type of interaction that may be more appropriate to school-learning at the beginners' stage than interactions involving a modification of input.

The drawbacks of corrective feedback

As appears in the three following examples, corrective feedback originates a dissociation rather than an association of intended meaning and form.

Example 1

L1: "I have just washed up".

L2: "Father has just done the homework".

L_n: "The cat has just washed up".

T: "That's a very good cat. All right, I think I must buy Michael's cat. It's a very interesting cat".

(Walmsley 1979).

The last student provides a correct form: *The cat has just washed up* but obviously has an irrelevant meaning in mind - the cat has washed itself - or no meaning at all. However the sentence concords with the requirement of imitating the model sentence in the present perfect. The teacher superimposes an interpretation that creates sense: *I think I must buy Michael's cat, it's a very interesting cat*, but whatever the student intended in the first place, it is doubtful whether the teacher's insinuation will have made it clear to him what it was that he actually conveyed to the teacher. If it is influential at all, the teacher's action aggravates the heterogeneity of meaning and form.

Example 2

- P : Me go visit friend yesterday
T : Oh, so you went to visit your friends yesterday?
P : No - friend
T : Sorry. You visited your friend yesterday. Then what did you do?

(Richards 1977).

The learner uses a telegraphic form: *Me go visit friend yesterday* whereby he makes his intended meaning understood. The teacher uses the expansion technique by which parents are observed to help their children: *You went to visit your friends yesterday*. Yet no merging of intent and form ensues, as no repetition is attempted by the student. The doubtful hope is expressed by Richards that the student will eventually be successful in adjusting to a form he heard just once in concordance with what he wanted to say.

Example 3

P : I prefer classical music and I prefer to listen to it myself
because my friends don't like this music Mmm eh they prefer
pop or jazz.

T : They prefer pop *to* jazz.

P : Pop *to* jazz... but I think it's noisy.

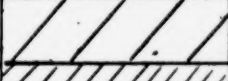
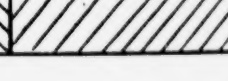
(Grandcolas 1981)

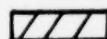
Prefer is supposed to be used with preposition *to*, so when the teacher hears *pop or jazz*, she superbly ignores the student's desire to criticize his friends' preference for pop or/and jazz, when his own preference is for classical music. The intimidated student repeats the teacher's correction, without realizing that it introduces a semantic addition (the preference of pop *to* jazz) that had in no way been intended and of course remains unintended.

In the three examples, the teacher's action increases the discrepancy of intended meaning and form as appears in table 1. The

Table 1

Discrepancy of form and intended meaning (intent) in examples 1, 2, and 3 before and after the teacher's action.

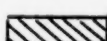
	Before teacher's action		After teacher's action	
	Form	Intent	Form	Intent
Ex 1				
Ex 2				
Ex 3				



Deficient



Satisfactory



Discrepant

teacher tends to consider the student to be in need of input i.e. to need either information on what the form means or information on how to express this meaning. She acts as a provider by adding exogenous meaning to endogenous form ⁽³⁾ (example 1) or exogenous form to endogenous meaning (example 2). When exogenous meaning is provided, endogenous meaning is either indefinite (example 1) or definite but not recognized as such (example 3).

Instead of total absence of form, some form is mostly already available, that the student does not think of using. Instead of total absence of meaning, some interpretation of the target form has already taken place, but it has remained too undefined to come out as adequate for the expression of a new and analogous meaning. I want to propose a type of feedback that uses the student's dormant potentialities for *intake* and brings both form and intent one step further to mutual recognition (see Boulouffe 1986 for a detailed analysis).

A common question arises: how can the teacher set up a satisfactory treatment of the proposed feedback when she knows neither what the student wishes to say nor what the student has already stored? Gathering this information is part of her responsibility. Surely the danger exists that broken or non-verbal language is ill-interpreted (example 3) but no expansion technique could ever work if the more mature speaker did not make guesses at what his less mature addressee has in mind. It is of course indispensable for the advocated technique to be successful that some meaning should be sufficiently initiated to make *some* interpretation possible. On the other hand, the appropriate form should have been stored with sufficient reinforcement for retrieval to be practicable when it is called for. The teacher should have made a note of what material has been suitably reinforced. In that way no exogenous provision is to be catered for: as appears from the following example (example 4) endogenous meaning is brought together with endogenous form.

Operational feedback

Example 4

Students were asked individually to comment on a picture of two girls dressing up in grown-up clothes, necklaces and hats. The younger girl is trying to open a drawer at the back of the room while the older one is in the front, looking at herself in the mirror. This mirror may also reflect her friend, so that the situation is ambiguous: is she looking at the latter or at herself? The teacher asks the student a general question about the older girl: *What is she doing?* The following is a typical protocol.

- 1 T : What is she doing?
P : She wear clothes
T : Yes What is she doing?
P : She sees her
- 5 T : Remember Killing time; he rang up a few minutes ago to...
P : Excuse himself
T : What is she doing?
P : She see himself she sees himself she see She sees himself
herself
T : She sees
- 10 P : She looks herself
T : What is she doing?
P : She is looking herself
T : The cat is on the roof... Look
P : Look at the cat
- 15 T : What is she doing?
P : She look She's looking at herself

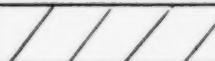
The student's first response: *She wear clothes* (line 2) indicates that her intended meaning is concerned with how the older girl looks to herself. Therefore *She sees her* (line 4) is not to be interpreted as a reference to the girl in the back, but as a covert overgeneralization:

her has been overgeneralized to *herself* and part of the student's intended meaning is thereby lost. How can the teacher help? She knows that the student knows the reflexive pronoun. She decides not to provide the correct form externally, as this perpetuates the student's dependency. She attempts to put the student back on the track of what she needs, by asking her to recall a situation in which she came across the masculine form of the reflexive pronoun. She uses the title of the supportive dialogue: *Killing time* (Passport to English) and the words leading up to the pronoun: *He rang up a few minutes ago to...* as cues (line 5). The student reacts immediately... *excuse himself* (line 6) and realizes that there is some use to be made of *himself*, which she first takes over into the new situation as such, but progressively adjusts (line 8). This is followed by a change of *sees* to *looks* and the addition of *at* after the student has remembered that *look* has to be used with a preposition. Her final production *She's looking at herself* brings her a step closer to target language forms and to the expression of her intended meaning than her initial *She wear clothes* or *She sees her*. Let it be noted that the teacher limited her intervention to repeating her cue question (lines 1, 3, 7, 11 and 15) and to eliciting the student's recall of two useful sentences she had previously memorized (lines 6 and 14).

Feedback is different in this case from what was observed in the three examples cited further above in that no exterior provision was made, whether it be of meaning or form. The teacher's action consisted in connecting the clue she got from the student as to her intended meaning: *She wear clothes* + *She sees her* with a form that had been received previously: *excuse himself*. Both this meaning and this form had interior anchors but needed further unfurling. The intended meaning first materialized as a bare reference to contextual elements⁽⁴⁾ and the needed form proved to have been received at first in too rigid a fashion, as if the reflexive was restricted to one verb *excuse* and to the masculine *himself*. The student was made to move mentally between these two anchors and adjustment resulted. The teacher's action in this case can be depicted as follows (table 2).

Table 2

Adjustment of form and intended meaning (intent) in example 4 before and after the teacher's action.

	Before teacher's action		After teacher's action	
	Form	Intent	Form	Intent
Ex. 4				

 Deficient

 Satisfactory

The mental shifting that pervades example 4 reminds us of the way children develop operationally. Children do not derive the invariance of quantity and number from watching a static amount of liquid in containers of different shapes, but because they see the liquid being poured back and forth. The child becomes aware that the quantity of liquid remains the same when he decenters from the prominence of the different shapes, and he decenters only when the liquid moves. It is well-known that older learners backslide operationally when they tackle novel difficulties. In a way similar to what happens in the child, the student in example 4 had to decenter from *her* as an expression of the reflexive and from *himself* as a suitable form for the feminine, and she decentered when she was made to move mentally between the two. (For more information on this procedure, see Boulouffe 1981, 1984a, 1984b).

R. Brown suggested this analogy between the development of operational intelligence and the acquisition of linguistic structure as early as 1968. Yet, in his interpretation, the analogy to the changes produced in the liquid by pouring it back and forth is to be found in "the changes produced in sentences as they move between persons in discourse" (288). To my mind, one should not forget that it is the *same* liquid that changes shapes when

it is poured back and forth, allowing the child to arrive at the abstract notion of invariance for which he receives no physical counterpart. In my example, the student arrives at the abstract notion of the reflexive for which she also receives no single formal counterpart. Yet it is because this same notion is alternatively apprehended in its meaning and its form that the learner grasps it, and not because the notion is tossed around from speaker to speaker. Presumably what the learner needs is support to *intake*, beyond input of material and before output materializes in communication. It may follow that interior build-up is conducive to communication rather than the other way round, especially in monolingual environments where little incentive for communication is to be derived from exchanges outside the classroom.

The need for the learner to receive assistance to intake has been hinted at by Walmsley 1976 in an article which contains many interesting insights:

"A considerable part of foreign-language teaching is concerned with the building-up of an adequate matrix within the brain of the learner. Facilitating this building-up or transfer of the matrix from its external to its internal station requires that some steps should be taken". (330).

Yet Walmsley self-contradictorily defeats his own insight by offering the counterjudgments that "building-up the matrix is almost entirely interior to the speaker, so that it is not one we can manipulate easily for teaching purposes" and "it appears to be universal in human beings, so that it can be expected to operate satisfactorily". (329).

Conclusion

The thesis put forward in this paper is that the drive to refine his expression cannot be expected to be as spontaneous in the L2 learner as in the child acquiring his mother-tongue. In L1 acquisition, cognitive development is contemporary with the development of language, which induces meaningful generalizations. In L2 learning, the problem is that meaning and form have separate existences, particularly as

regards the expression of modality. Language learners may be expected to depend on a revival of their operational competence for progress, just as learners of other subjects. They only regain this faculty with the help of pedagogic support, as a number of experiments have demonstrated in reference to the teaching of physics, electronics and geometry (Halbwachs 1981, Nussbaum & Novick 1982, Vermersch 1979, Escribe & Navarro 1979, Navarro 1983).

The present paper has studied the dialectic ebb and flow of form and meaning within a single speech-act for which the language needed could be collected from the learner's memory. The problem examined has not been one of emergence of either meaning or form but one of adjustment between meaning and form. Operative feedback induces more active participation from the learner than feedback that provides him with a form he does not recognize or with a meaning he has not intended and stands little chance of adopting as his.

Note 1 "Giving the right answer was the most popular treatment" (Fanselow 1977).

Note 2 For minute variations in this strategy see Chaudron 1977. The emphasis is clearly on feedback as provision: "The teacher *provides* the correct answer or adds linguistic material to the student's utterance (expansion)... The teacher *provides* information as to the cause of error or not... The teacher *provides* reformulation or a clue isolating the type of error without providing correction... The teacher asks another student to *provide* correction or returns to the original error-maker". (my italics).

Note 3 *Endogenous* and *exogenous* are used by Piagetian theoreticians to qualify resources the subject either finds in his own storage or receives from an external provider.

Note 4 The present student's tendency to express a referential rather than modal meaning is in no way exceptional. A number of writers have deplored the tendency in L2 learners to retreat from the expression of their intended meaning, thereby even distorting their identity (Harder 1980) or their psychological set-up (Green 1977). Kasper (1982) shows in her examples of learner-native speaker dialogues that learners do not mark their speech-acts for modality at all. Ellis (1982) discriminates three stages in the learner's progressive distancing from the here and now and growing capacity of referring to displaced activity: a stage 1 where the speaker avoids modality, a stage 2 where he starts to acquire a number of modality elements, and a stage 3 reached only by those learners who are motivated to refine the system. Johansson (1978: 50) makes the useful suggestion that covert errors (errors that appear as correct forms but do not convey the speaker's meaning) may hinder communication to a greater extent than overt errors. Frith (1977) makes a useful distinction between errors due to form or function. The latter result in the speaker "saying the opposite of what he was attempting to say" (112). In spite of these comments and Weinreich's (1974: 63) warning that "Poverty of expression in the second language is as a rule not recorded as a lack of proficiency", there have been few uncompromising suggestions that errors due to avoidance, such as the avoidance of the present perfect by Chinese students, may be partly due to a lack of consistency in correction procedures (Cohen & Robbins 1976: 50).

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